

FROM THE MAGAZINE

The Truth About White Flight

Conventional history of the exodus out of cities ignores numerous complex and interrelated causes.

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Speaking at an October 2019 Obama Foundation Summit, Michelle Obama [reminisced](#) about growing up in South Shore, a Chicago lakefront neighborhood. Some memories were bitter. The former First Lady, born in 1964, lamented living through “white flight.” As “upstanding families like ours, who were doing everything we were supposed to do . . . moved in,” she said, “white folks moved out.”

In her telling, the whites who abandoned South Shore had motives as obvious as they were ugly, choosing to relocate because “they were afraid of what our families represented.” They voted with their U-Hauls to reject families like hers because of “the color of our skin” and “the texture of our hair,” those “artificial things that don’t even touch on the values that people bring to life. And so, yeah, I feel a sense of injustice.”

Worse, the whites who fled did more than wound feelings. As “one by one, they packed their bags and they ran from us,” the departing whites “left communities in shambles.” They “disinvested.” In her 2018 memoir *Becoming*, Mrs. Obama, née Robinson, recalls that the “tilt was clearly beginning” in the South Shore of her youth, with “the neighborhood businesses closing one by one, the blight setting in.” Beyond the loss of economic capital, disinvestment entailed the withdrawal of social capital.

In its factual basics, Obama’s account is accurate. *Becoming* points out that South Shore’s population was 96 percent white in 1950 and 96 percent black in 1980. (The big change took place in the sixties, when the neighborhood went from [89.6 percent white at the start of the decade to 70 percent black by the end](#). As of 2015, South Shore was 93.5 percent black and 2.2 percent white.) Nor was this location an outlier, locally or nationally. In the 1920s, University of Chicago sociologists divided the city, for analytical purposes, into 77 “community areas,” defined by boundaries that the city government still uses for planning and assessment. Of the 18 community areas now more than 90 percent black, ten were at least 75 percent white in 1960. Nationally, millions of blacks moved from the South to northern and western cities during the Great Migration. Economist [Leah Boustan’s examination](#) of 70 metropolitan areas

found that for every black family that moved into a central city between 1940 and 1970, two white families moved out.

Michelle Obama's interpretation of these facts is widely shared. Journalist [Tom Jacobs](#), for example, sees no explanation for white flight, "aside from pure prejudice." Filmmaker David Simon, creator of *The Wire*, [contends](#) that "frightened whites" didn't flee slums; they left cities like Baltimore, his home and subject, solely to "recreate a hypersegregated society," following the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision. The slums came later, after whites took the cities' tax base with them to the suburbs.

The *Chicago Tribune's* Dahleen Glanton [endorses](#) and sharpens Obama's remarks. "Blacks did absolutely nothing to drive out white people," she writes. "Whites left simply because they did not want to live around black people"—because of their aversion to an America "where people of all races had a piece of the pie and where children grew up to be successful enough to demand good-paying jobs and live in homes as nice as they could afford." For many whites, Glanton adds, "equality remains their No. 1 fear." Or, as the former First Lady said, "I want to remind white folks that y'all were running from us." And "you're *still* running."

But the contention that white racism caused white flight, which then caused disinvestment, leaving behind devastated majority-black communities, is suspiciously tidy. Rather than being a single result derived from a single cause, this social transformation, unfolding over decades, involved decisions and actions by millions of people in dozens of metropolitan areas—and almost certainly had multiple causes, interrelated in ways too tangled for simplistic explanations.

Boustan, who made the Great Migration and white flight the subject of her 2016 book *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, cautions that few whites who moved from cities to suburbs in the decades after World War II "left personal accounts, and they may not have been able to articulate exactly why they moved." She concludes that "only a portion of white flight can be traced back to the now-classic dynamic of racial turnover." Other motivators included a wish to reside in less densely populated communities and concerns about tax burdens and public services. Ascribing white flight solely to racism is "reductive," [says](#) Charles Marohn, founder of the nonprofit Strong Towns. As Marohn writes, "for an individual or a family whose home is losing value, when another home on the outskirts of town—one that just happens to be newer, more spacious, and served by better schools—is *gaining* value, it's very logical to make that move given the opportunity." Even if we were to hypothesize an ethnically homogenous America, he argues, suburbs would have grown in much the same way as they did after World War II.

Suburbanization was a phenomenon even in metropolises that saw little demographic change from the Great Migration. Boustan cites Minneapolis–St. Paul, which, after World War II, saw only a small increase in the number of black residents but rapid growth of its suburbs. The "newly prosperous families," she writes, were "seeking larger houses and more open space."

In *Lost Cities* (1995), Alan Ehrenhalt discusses Elmhurst, a Chicago suburb 16 miles west of the Loop. The newcomers who bought its new ranch houses and split-levels were “refugees from Chicago apartments,” he writes, “fleeing all the things suburbanites fled in the 1950s: landlords and cooking smells, neighbors one flight above or uncomfortably close next door, physical surroundings that carried indelible reminders of hard times years ago.” One new resident told the *Elmhurst Press*, “It is wonderful to be able to see grass and trees, instead of hallways and speeding automobiles.”

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These quality-of-life considerations must have been important, Boustan notes, since the whites who made up the mid-century diaspora drove their moving vans right past city neighborhoods “no different in racial composition from the surrounding suburbs.” That remains true even today. Though non-Hispanic whites now account for less than one-third of Chicago’s population (32.7 percent, as of 2017), eight of the city’s 77 community areas are at least 70 percent white and less than 5 percent black. Together, they’re home to 300,000 Chicagoans, one-ninth of the city’s population. Some, like Lincoln Park, are too expensive for most families. But other neighborhoods, mostly on the Northwest Side, feature the same modest bungalows and three-flats as South Shore.

Neither in *Becoming* nor in the recent public discussion of her childhood does Michelle Obama mention unhappy aspects about the South Shore she grew up in, other than white flight and disinvestment. “There were no gang fights,” she recalled in the talk, “no territorial battles.” With the help of Carlo Rotella’s *The World Is Always Coming to an End* (2019), we gain a fuller picture. Rotella, a journalist and Boston College English professor, was born the same year as Michelle Robinson and grew up five blocks from her house. Though he appears to share the former First Lady’s political viewpoint, his recollections of South Shore in the 1960s and 1970s are quite different. Rotella’s mother and father, immigrants from Spain and Italy, respectively, bought a bungalow in South Shore while both were pursuing graduate degrees at the nearby University of Chicago. Precisely because of the buyers’ market caused by the ongoing exodus of whites, the young academics could acquire a home that would have been unaffordable in Hyde Park, their university’s affluent neighborhood.

Like Michelle Robinson, Rotella grew up in South Shore before going east to college in the early 1980s. Robinson was part of the neighborhood’s large black majority by the time she enrolled in Princeton, while he had the opposite experience, coming of age in the same place as it changed from predominantly to vestigially white. During this era, Rotella points out, crime increased dramatically in South Shore, where it had previously been low. The worst felonies—

murder, assault, rape, robbery, and burglary—were committed at rates nearly three times the Chicago average, turning South Shore into one of the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods.

Whites’ fear of crime, Rotella says, “wasn’t unfounded, nor was it simply reducible to white people reacting to the arrival of black people.” The many neighbors who moved away during his adolescence had their reasons, “but the way the story of their departure got told often took the form of ‘enough is enough’ after a gunpoint robbery, home invasion, or similar last-straw outrage.” One former South Shore resident interviewed for Rotella’s book said simply, “Who wants to get used to living like that?”

The last-straw outrage for some came in 1970, when, during an attempted robbery, a young black man shot and killed Manny Lazar, owner of the Wee Folks toy store. Lazar was “beloved by generations of children in the neighborhood,” says Rotella. His daughter, Caryn Lazar Amster, published a memoir, *The Pied Piper of South Shore* (2005), which quotes one of her father’s former customers: “The day ‘Mr. Wee Folks’ was shot was, for many of us, the day that South Shore died.”

The counterfactual is hard to resist: How differently would white flight have unfolded absent the crime wave that began in the 1960s? According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the national homicide rate doubled between 1960 and 1980, from 5.1 murders per 100,000 Americans to 10.2, its highest level. Chicago, always a rough city, already had a homicide rate of 10.5 per 100,000 residents in 1960, but it exploded to 28.7 in 1980 and 30.7 in 1990.

The riots of the 1960s saw lawlessness engulf entire neighborhoods. Chicago’s most serious disturbance was in April 1968, after Martin Luther King’s murder. Some of the looting and National Guard deployments were near South Shore, Rotella recounts, but most of the mayhem was on the West Side. By the riots’ [conclusion](#), nine people were dead, more than 300 injured, more than 2,000 arrested, and 260 stores and businesses destroyed. In its aftermath, white flight from Chicago accelerated. The city, which [had been](#) 85.9 percent white in 1950 and 76.4 percent in 1960, saw that proportion fall to 65.6 percent in 1970 and 49.6 percent in 1980. (The Census Bureau didn’t begin to identify “non-Hispanic whites” as a separate category until 1980, when that group accounted for 43.2 percent of Chicago’s population.) In 1988, an official in the city’s planning department [calculated](#) that nearly 500,000 people, mostly whites, departed the city in the first half of the 1970s.

We know that the sharp drop in crime that began in the early 1990s coincided with gentrification, evidence that many whites prefer high- to low-density living—if cities are safe. Some of the gentrifiers are the children or grandchildren of people who, with varying degrees of reluctance, moved out of neighborhoods like South Shore. We also know that the new city dwellers’ desire to live in more ethnically diverse urban areas brings its own tensions. A 2015 *Philadelphia* magazine [article](#) on the “death of gentrification guilt” examined the remorse fatigue that comes from being told that it was racist then for whites to move out of cities—and

racist now for whites to move into them. “Where do we want the upper middle-class people to live?” asked one new Philadelphian. “Anywhere?”

Whatever else it may accomplish, the recent upheaval following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis seems likely to cut the Gordian knot posed by gentrification. Across the country, thousands chose to honor Floyd’s memory by making clear that riots are not an artifact of the distant 1960s but an ever-present possibility—and then by guaranteeing a sharp rise in crime after delegitimizing and defunding city police departments. A dramatic rise in crime is not only bad in itself but also a pervasive problem affecting those other facets of community life that determine whether people stay or leave. Rotella reports that by the mid-1970s, “vacancy rates on South Shore’s main shopping streets had reached 20 percent.” Even residents prepared to tolerate more crime will eventually consider relocating to places where, of necessity, they end up working, shopping, or going out for dinner.

Then there is public education. As economist William Fischel demonstrated in these pages in 1998, the quality of local schools is a key determinant of livability and property values, even for families without kids attending those schools. But when lawlessness on the streets spreads to hallways and classrooms, “Teachers who are breaking up fights or keeping order are ones who are not teaching,” as Nicholas Lemann wrote in *The Promised Land* (1991). His book, about the intersection of the Great Migration and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, records that at Chicago’s DuSable High School, a few blocks from one of the South Side’s worst housing projects, students were “given A’s for such work as this description of Ernest Hemingway’s story ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place’: ‘He old man is a deaf man who is tiring to make a living.’”

Even for homeowners, landlords, or business owners willing to tolerate such deterioration, flight might still be the reasonable response. As they used to say on Wall Street (in the era before traders spent their days in front of computer screens), “Don’t fight the tape.” Do not, that is, become so enamored of *your* theory about the correct valuation of the market or a particular stock that you become oblivious to evidence that other investors have arrived at a different consensus.

From 1960 to 1980, South Shore’s homeowners saw the value of their primary asset decline, landlords found it increasingly difficult to attract and retain tenants who paid the rent regularly, and enterprises lost good employees and customers. In these circumstances, even the most rooted businesses and residents eventually capitulated and stopped fighting the tape. Such decisions don’t really qualify as disinvestments because those who stayed in South Shore as these trends became undeniable were no longer making investments. Either knowingly or in effect, they were making donations—advancing others’ interests through choices inimical to their own.

During the two decades that South Shore changed from a white neighborhood to a black one, it also changed from a safe neighborhood to a dangerous one. Over the four decades since it

became overwhelmingly black, it has remained dangerous. A security guard told Rotella that, despite moving from another of Chicago's toughest neighborhoods five years earlier, it was not until he came to South Shore that he "saw dead people in the street and other people just going about their business around them." Residents refer to South Shore's worst section as Terror Town. The same story describes many communities across America.

It is important to state this incontrovertible fact—yet the story of South Shore and similar neighborhoods does not mean that predominantly black communities are always and necessarily lawless, nor that white ones are inherently tranquil. Further, it does not mean that white residents of South Shore were right to assume, however many did, that any black family moving into their neighborhood fell somewhere on the spectrum between disruptive and life-threatening. Michelle Obama's sense of injustice about white flight centers on her belief that South Shore whites generalized about honest, hardworking families like hers, making no distinction between the Robinsons and newly arrived blacks whose behavior might reduce rather than enhance neighborhood livability.

Sociologist Orlando Patterson does make the distinction. In 2015, he [wrote](#) that the great majority of inner-city residents are "law-abiding, God-fearing and often socially conservative." What makes certain neighborhoods bad is a "small but destructive minority" that "comes largely from the disconnected youth between ages 16 and 24." They are disconnected functionally: neither holding nor seeking a job but also not enrolled in any educational institution. (Rotella cites a study showing that this set of criteria describes 47 percent of Chicago's black males between the ages of 20 and 24.) And they are disconnected attitudinally from dispositions and habits that strengthen neighborhoods, embracing instead what Patterson calls a "street or thug culture" that valorizes "hypermasculinity, the aggressive assertion and defense of respect, extreme individualism, materialism and a reverence for the gun, all inflected with a threatening vision of blackness." As a consequence: "With few skills and a contempt for low-wage jobs, they subsist through the underground economy of illicit trading and crime. Many belong to gangs." Patterson calls for redoubling our commitment to criminal justice and social-welfare programs, despite disappointing results in the past. He also appeals for "one long-term, fundamental change that can come only from within the black community: a reduction in the number of kids born to single, usually poor, women." At the time he wrote, the black out-of-wedlock birthrate stood at 72 percent.

Michelle Obama is almost certainly correct to think that *some* white South Shore residents assumed the worst about her family 50 years ago, based on the Robinsons' skin color. But a less accusatory interpretation of white flight is at least as plausible. Because South Shore was not Chicago's first predominantly white neighborhood to experience racial turnover, its white residents in the 1960s and 1970s were aware of the established pattern: demographic change led to higher crime, lower property values, and deterioration. If not for this knowledge that "the black poor will follow where the black middle class goes," Rotella contends, "much of the resistance to the initial black migration into South Shore would never have materialized."

Rotella argues that blacks of every social class moved into the same neighborhoods at about the same time because of housing segregation: with few communities to choose from, many blacks were quickly drawn to an area after some pioneers had ventured there. The geographic concentration of blacks with different class backgrounds and outlooks has proved inconducive to racial solidarity. “On the South Side,” he writes, “you hear ‘the element,’ short for ‘criminal element’ or ‘undesirable element,’ applied as a term of black-on-black opprobrium not only to violent criminals but also to quality-of-life perps who litter and make too much noise and wear their pants too low, wrecking things for their decent neighbors by sowing disorder and fear.” His book quotes a letter that South Shore resident Hattie Wilburn wrote to the *Chicago Tribune* in 1998, complaining about an influx of new residents using federal housing vouchers after the city started demolishing its high-rise projects. “It is as if the gates of Hell opened, and these people were let out. . . . And as they tear down more of these projects, we can expect more of these people to be relocated in our neighborhoods.”

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And not just in Chicago. A 2011 Associated Press [article](#) described the same tensions in Southfield, a suburb just outside Detroit, 70 percent of whose 71,000 inhabitants are black. The longtime residents, most with solid middle-class jobs and attitudes, were angry about an influx of poorer blacks from the inner city. “It’s not a black-white thing,” the police chief, himself African-American, explained. “This is a black-black thing. My six-figure blacks are very concerned about multiple-family, economically depressed people moving into rental homes and apartments, bringing in their bad behaviors.” Those behaviors made small rips in the social fabric that portended large ones later on. The arrivals from Detroit “still think it’s OK to play basketball at 3 o’clock in the morning,” said the police chief, and “it’s OK to play football in the streets when there’s a car coming; it’s OK to walk down the streets three abreast.” Some black residents told the AP reporter that they were considering moving to a more distant suburb, even if it meant selling their homes at a loss.

Indeed, a further reason to doubt that white flight was simply, or even primarily, due to racial prejudice is that “black flight,” a more recent development, is following the same course. Examining a development “crushing South Shore and other once-stable neighborhoods on the city’s South and West Sides”—namely, the “exodus of middle-class African-American families seeking safe neighborhoods and job opportunities”—a 2017 *Tribune* [article](#) quoted Jennifer and Jason Parks, who once lived on the block where Michelle Robinson grew up. The Parks family’s enough-is-enough moment came in 2014, when a 20-year-old man was fatally shot on their street while walking his younger brother to school. “South Shore ranks sixth among the

city's 77 community areas for incidents where one or more people were killed over the past decade," the *Tribune* reported.

The dangers that, 50 years ago, caused the Robinsons' white neighbors to move away are now causing black families to abandon South Shore. "If I was holding on to Chicago and something happened to one of our babies," Mrs. Parks said, "it would crush me." Rotella records that the net decline in South Shore's black population between 2000 and 2014 was 12,790. (Its total population in 2015 was 51,451.) As of 2017, the Parks family was preparing to move into a new house in northern Indiana. There was nothing anomalous about their decision. Last year, the *Chicago Sun-Times* [reported](#) that "[t]he city's black population has fallen from a peak of 1.2 million in 1980 to fewer than 800,000 now and is predicted to drop to 665,000 by 2030."

Though especially pronounced in Chicago, black flight is a national phenomenon. Brookings Institution demographer William Frey [noted in 2015](#) that nine of the ten U.S. cities with the largest black populations in 2000 saw those numbers decline over the ensuing decade. According to Frey's [calculations](#), the proportion of blacks residing within "urban cores" fell from 47 percent to 41.7 percent between 1990 and 2017. "Much of that population," he says, "is suburbanizing." Ninety-six of the 100 largest metropolitan areas showed gains in the number of blacks living in suburbs. "Leading black movement to the suburbs," he adds, "are the young, those with higher education, and married couples with children—attributes that characterized white suburbanization for almost a century."

Regarding tensions in places like Southfield, Georgetown University law professor Sheryll Cashin decries the "black middle-class dilemma": "To the higher income black people, if you don't want to love and help your lower-income black brethren, why would you expect white people to? If you can't do it, no one in society can do it." Yet black flight is testament to how little purchase such pleas for unity have when weighed against the same considerations that drove white flight: safety, economic opportunity, and quality of life. "It turns out that blacks, like whites, want better and safer schools for their kids and don't like to be mugged or have their property vandalized," writes economist Walter Williams.

Because better-educated and more affluent blacks are especially likely to depart cities for the suburbs, the urban neighborhoods that they leave behind experience the same disinvestment that Michelle Robinson discerned as a child in South Shore. "The loss of the black middle class deprives their communities of their skills, tax revenue and political clout," the *Chicago Tribune*'s William Lee [wrote in 2016](#), "while also robbing a younger generation of desperately needed role models." DePaul University sociologist William Sampson [laments](#) the vicious cycle: the departure of the most successful blacks from a city neighborhood furthers its decline, which, in turn, encourages all those who possibly can to depart. Middle-income blacks started abandoning Chicago neighborhoods in the 1980s, he says, leaving them to become dominated by impoverished blacks. "Now, there's no heart to hold these communities together."

While it's understandable for Michelle Obama to resent what she took to be whites stereotyping her family, this experience does not validate her own generalizations. "White folks" were not *all* running from South Shore *simply* because of the new residents' skin color. By the time significant numbers of blacks started arriving there in the 1960s, it had become a "heavily Jewish neighborhood," according to Rotella, where the desire to make racial integration work was considerably stronger than the desire to make it stop. Despite her father's murder by a black assailant, even Caryn Lazar Amster describes the black families that began moving into South Shore as respectfully as Michelle Obama could hope. In her memoir, Amster calls them "good people who enhanced our neighborhood's ethnic and religious diversity," families that "wanted what we wanted: a decent place to raise their kids, good schools, and good neighbors." The villains of her story are not South Shore blacks in general, or even blacks committing crimes, but real-estate speculators profiting from the *fear* of blacks committing crimes. It is of this group that Amster asks, "Didn't we Jews learn after the Holocaust that we can't let people push us around?"

Rotella provides a detailed account of attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to make South Shore diverse while keeping it safe and prosperous, efforts that were earnest, energetic—and futile. The problem, ultimately, is that people will make heroic sacrifices for family or country, but their relationships to their neighborhoods are conditional. "[N]o matter how committed you are to your neighborhood," says Rotella, "that commitment is limited, and you'll move on if the perceived rewards of moving are high enough or the penalties for staying severe enough." In *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970), Albert Hirschman described the three kinds of responses available to people who feel that a relationship—such as with a political organization, employer, or church—is significantly flawed. Neighborhoods are tenuous entities because loyalty to them is finite, and voicing our concerns is often unavailing. And where loyalty and voice are both weak, exit becomes the inevitable response.

In short, the thesis that racism alone caused white flight, disinvestment, and ultimately neighborhood decline is dubious, both empirically and logically. Some whites who fled South Shore and communities like it in the decades after World War II were prejudiced. Others were simply observant—of rising crime, devastating riots, deteriorating public schools, vanishing business opportunities, and plunging property values. Their departure does not amount to a moral transgression. Further, one cannot blame South Shore's decline on departing whites without also maintaining certain corollaries: that by remaining in large numbers, they would have either prevented the arrival of "the element" that wrecked the neighborhood or would have had an edifying, pacifying effect on youths otherwise drawn to street or thug culture. It would then follow that the white owners of homes and businesses there had a *duty* to stay, risking solvency and safety, for the sake of their new black neighbors. To state such propositions is to demonstrate their unreality.

Goodwill, which manifestly rules out bigotry, is indeed a necessary condition for a heterogeneous America to cohere and flourish. But it is not a sufficient one. Sharing a nation also requires candor and rigor in examining every reason for ethnic tensions. Ascribing the difficulty of integrating residential communities entirely to white racism is not only inaccurate

but also harmful, an impediment to interpreting a complex situation intelligently, and then improving it. Morality tales of white villains and black victims may assuage the resentments that Michelle Obama started accumulating 50 years ago. Their only effect today, however, is to render the profound challenge of reconciling liberty, equality, and diversity even harder.

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